Anti-politics of the Heterodox Poetry and Life history of Shah Abdul Latif: Ambedkarian Perspective

Ghulam Hussain

1Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad

September 25, 2019

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyze from the Ambedkarian Perspective the interpretation of Latif’s poetry by the Progressives to assess its emancipatory potential for the Dalits. Building my critique primarily on the scholarly work of H.T.Sorley, I argue that in an attempt to construct the Sufi image of ‘Sindhi nation’, the Progressives undermine the casteist, fatalist and sectarian import of Latif’s poetry and life-history. I argue that due to Latif’s heterodox and multivocal nature of poetry and ambiguity regarding the originality of his verses gives expression multiple and contradictory signifiers, including the casteist ones. This heterodoxy of Latif allows the ‘Progressives’, like any other social and political group, to legitimize and popularize the selective verses that may have, at least on surface, the egalitarian, patriotic import, and exonerate Latif from any possible hegemonic impact of the casteist values and the Ashrafia privileges that he enjoyed in his times, or the Progressives themselves continue to enjoy.

Anti-politics of the Heterodox Poetry and Life History of Shah Abdul Latif: Ambedkarian Perspective

Ghulam Hussain

Web of Science ResearcherID: P-7210-2018

ORCID 0000-0002-9538-1840

Ghulam Hussain is a doctoral fellow at the Department of Anthropology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. He can be accessed online at mahesarg@gmail.com.

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyze from the Ambedkarian perspective the interpretation of Latif’s poetry by the Progressives to assess its emancipatory potential for the Dalits. Building my critique primarily on the scholarly work of H.T.Sorley, I argue that in an attempt to construct the Sufi image of ‘Sindhi nation’, the Progressives undermine the casteist, fatalist and sectarian import of Latif’s poetry and life-history. Latif’s heterodox and multivocal nature of poetry and ambiguity regarding the originality of his verses gives expression to multiple and contradictory signifiers, including the casteist ones. This heterodoxy of Latif creates the anti-political crises of interpretations and self-contradictory projections that depoliticizes the problem of casteism. It allows the ‘Progressives’, like any other social and political group, to legitimize and popularize the selective verses that may have, at least on surface, the egalitarian and patriotic import, to exonerate Latif from any possible hegemonic impact of the orthodox casteist values and the Ashrafia privileges that he enjoyed during his lifetime, or the Ashrafia-Savarna Progressives themselves continue to enjoy.
Keywords: Casteism, Sayedism, Sindhi Progressive Literature, Political Sufism, Hegemony, Ashrafia Modernity, Postcolonial Sindh

Introduction

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (b. 1689-1752) (hereby referred as ‘Latif’) is believed to be the greatest of the mystic or Sufi philosophers (Memon, 2002), ‘gher-mamooli mufakir’ (extraordinary thinker) (Chandio, 2016) by the literary activists locally known as Taraki-pasand, hereby referred as Progressives. This Progressive literary-political making of Latif aimed at recreating him as the flawless and anti-caste entity of Sindh based on nationalist, Marxist and or the progressive lines is both the reflection and cause of Latif becoming the most celebrated poet and Sufi saint of the post-colonial Sindh (see Sorley, 1944, p.170; Schimmel, 1974; Jotwani, 1975; Asmani, 1988; Jotwani, 1996; Junejo, 2004; Paleejo, 2012; Mehrani, 2014; Latifi,1981; Bhutto,2017; Chandio, 2016; Danish, 2016; Chandio, 2017; Phalkaro, 2017).

In this paper, I specifically critique the historiography of Latif by the Progressives for its neglect of the casteist import of Latif’s life-history and poetry, and the uncritical approach towards the colonial influences upon the modernist project of nation-making. Benefiting from the colonial intervention (see Sorley, 1940, p.225), the Progressives Ashrafia class took advantage of the multivocality and vagueness of Latif’s mysticism to undermine the casteist import of his poetry and ignore caste credentials of Latif who belonged to the influential Sayed-Pir family which was held in high esteem during Latif’s lifetime, and continues to be revered in its material form as the Shrine of a Sufi and a Sayed having superior pedigree by the majority of local Sindhi people of different sects and classes for different and often contradictory purposes. The problem emerges when the Progressives only focus on apparently egalitarian aspects of Latif’s poetry ignoring the fact that Latif’s heterodoxy and his folkloric content creates space for sectarian, casteist and ethnic pride for Ashrafia-Savarna castes and inculcates submissiveness among Dalits. Latif’s heterodox and multivocal nature of poetry and ambiguity regarding the originality of his verses gives expression to multiple and contradictory signifiers, including the casteist ones.

Given the Ambedkarian demand that progressive sections society must stand by the most oppressed castes and mount the critique of Ashrafia-Savarna classes (see Ambedkar, 1944; 2014 (1991); Ilaiah, 2010; Guru & Sarukai, 2012; Prasad & Gajjan, 2007), I listen also Suraj Yenge, an Ambedkarite scholar on Rohith Vemula 2nd Death Anniversary held at UoH, 17 Jan 2018, asserting Ambedkarian predicament. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9o_9FSp3Fs. (accessed, September 18, 2019)., this caste-blind politic-literary interpretation of Latif by the Progressives function as an ‘anti-political’ borrow the term ‘anti-political’ from James Ferguson (1994), who applied it to understand the ways in which Western-led development was depoliticizing the question of resource allocation and strengthening the bureaucratic hegemony. I apply this notion to the locally embedded Ashrafia-Savarna hegemony as it functions through the Progressives to undermine the question of caste through their literary-political renditions. exercise as it depoliticizes the social category of caste. Following this line of reasoning, I critique both the Latif’s orthodox life-history, heterodox poetry and its interpretations by the Progressives. I contend this undermining of casteism and Dalit33‘Dalit’ the Marathi term that literally means ‘oppressed’, and is often used as the symbol of self-consciousness of being oppressed by the historically oppressed castes. exclusion does not come handy in the essentially homogenous Progressive interpretations of Latif. As a historically authoritative source material on Latif, I refer to H.T.Sorley (1940) on a number of occasions and juxtapose it with the projection of Latif by the Progressives, particularly by G.M.Sayed (1952), the founding father modern Sindhi nationalism, and Jami Chandio (2016) the contemporary Sindhi progressive thinker.

The analysis is primarily based on archival data, vernacular literature review, a few important interviews and is supplemented by ethnographic insights. Although this study primarily relies on the discursive analyses of Sindhi (but also English) texts on Latif, yet it did also involve a few human participants with whom I conversed during fieldwork. I have tried my best to ensure their anonymity as per the ethical norms and in accordance with the ethical standards recommended by the Department of Anthropology, Quaid-i-Azam University, and Islamabad.
Theoretical Framework

Although Sorley (1940), Schimmel (1974 & 198244See also: Schimmel, Annemarie (1982). Islam in India and Pakistan. Brill.) and many other scholars take into consideration the Ashrafia credentials of Latif, they do not shed much light on the role that Sayedism and Sammatism (belief that Sayed and Sammat castes are superior) (see Hussain, 2019a; Hussain, 2019b) could have played in the life of Latif or in the interpretation of his poetry. They also do not predict the sociopolitical implications of the heterodox poetry of Latif for the oppressed classes or castes as it manifested in the form of the recasting of Latif as the ‘national’ ‘thinker’ and ‘revolutionary’ or as an inspiration for the Shia and Sunni Sufis.

According to Sorley, Latif was, at best, the first original poet ‘typically Muslim in sentiment and expression’, with ‘the musical foundations in local indigenous Sindhi or Hindu culture (Sorley, 1940, p.220), who departed from the contemporaries of his time who used to do poetry in Persian language55 Latif’s poetry is the heterodox mix of several religious, cultural, ethnic and geographical influences, mainly the Arabian, Persian, Indian (including in that term the influences of Urdu poetry, Hindu music and local folklore), Baluchi and Sufistic (Sorley, 1940.p.238). . Although Latif ‘responded to a true impulse to interpret the deepest ideas of the common folk amongst whom he spent the whole of his life’ (Sorley, 1940, p.209), ‘the poems of the Risalo are all set as per the rigid Hindu caste order whereby melodic forms of Hindu musical traditions become deified after assigning its production to specific ‘castes of performers mostly belonging to the castes ‘held in lower esteem’ (p.223). Given these conscious or the unconscious casteist currents in Latif, it becomes pertinent to analyze the extent of the explicit or the implicit critique of religiosity that his poetry may permit, the enquiry that has not been so far adequately attended by the Progressives, who, I argue, have so far subsisted primarily on the repetitive, largely unverifiable, claims that Latif’s poetry is capable to resolve. However, more than that, looking from the Ambedkarian perspective (see Ambedkar, 1944; 2014 (1991); Ilaiiah, 2010; Guru & Sarukai, 2012; Prasad & Gajjan, 2007), the important factor to analyze will be to see how the Progressive project or hide the historically embedded caste location of Latif and relativize any casteist elements inherent in his poetry. Moreover, Ambedkarism demands the explicit anti-caste stance and mounts the critique of hegemonic conditions that (re)produce casteism and graded inequalities embedded in local discourses and religious or neoliberal narratives (see Guru, 2011a;2011b; Kumar, 2018).

Given this theoretical understanding, the basic literary-analytic method should be to see the literary text as the reflection of the (in) egalitarian, inclusionary and or the exclusionary social practices and the social structures, and therefore, should be analyzed in relation to caste-based inequalities and the hegemonic relations existing between the Ashrafia-Savarnas and the non-Ashrafia-Savarna classes. Given this Ambedkarian guideline, I investigate the dissonance or the incongruence between Latif’s literary representations and the local interpretations, that is, the way different ethnic and political groups and castes make sense of it and use it in their everyday life. I also look for the evidence of the explicit challenge Shah Latif posed to the Ashrafia and the Savarna classes, and mounted the inter-subjective critique of Sayedism and Ashrafia hegemony by Latif and the Progressives.

The Heterodoxy of Latif and the scope of its Multiple Interpretations

‘[T]he poems, as we know them today, have, however, suffered from the fact that they were not written down as composed. They have also been subjected to careless compilation by persons unfamiliar with literary tradition and ill-equipped with scholarly taste. In the form in which they now exist there is much extraneous matter. It is often difficult to say with any accuracy whether a doubtful passage is the work of Shah Abdul Latif or not. The manuscripts of the poems are very discrepant in this respect.’ […] The verses have been emended so as to embody these inartistic asides and these alien intrusions. Thus the poems as we know them today are not identical with the verses that came from the lips of Shah Abdul Latif himself as he recited them. They are instead the verses as subsequently written down by others, altered by them, and edited by them[…] The poems do not make easy reading unless their religious background is seen in true perspective and unless the Sufi imagery in which so much of the thought is cast is seen in its historical setting as a
development of the mystic elements of Islam which were introduced into Sind centuries ago and found there a congenial home. H.T. Sorley (1944 p.224-227)

It is believed that a few verses of Shah Karim, Shah Habib, Mion Shah Inayat, Hafiz Sheerazi (Persian poet) and of other poets are believed to have been incorporated in Shah-jo-Risalo (Sorley, 1944, p.203; Baloch, 2010). Many Progressives, whom I interviewed, disowned Sururs since Latif's poetry was meant for singing, each chapter of his compiled verses called 'bait' in Sindhi, is prefixed as 'Surr', which literally means 'melody'. The scholars have so far not reached a consensus on the actual numbers of Surrs and the verses or poems of Latif uttered. Kedaro, which they argued, was the latter addition to the poetry of Shah Latif. Although Dr. Nabi Bux Baloch (2010) in this remarkable research spanning over 3 decades, has considerably sorted out Latif's poetry, yet the inherent ambiguity about the originality, the lack of historical evidence about certain verses of Latif and the heterodox nature of his poetry created space for the varied and often contradictory interpretations Latif by both the Progressives and the conservatives to selectively pick their favorite verses and disown others. For instance, Latif's hagiographic presentation continued to be the symbol of inherited superiority of Sayeds based on their miraculous religious sanctity. In Khazanat-ul-Arifain (1962), Molana Durr Muhammad Kandhro (who is considered as one the experts on Latif by Bareli Sufig) writes that Latif used to pray (Tahajud Namaz) early in the morning or late in the night, the religious practice usually attributed to the followers of Shahar of Islam or Wahdatul-Shahoodi Sufig. Kandhro begins his introduction of Latif by attributing several religiously sanctified appellations to his supposedly superior Sayed pedigree. He writes:

Hasab and Nasab [Social class and genealogical roots]: The pedigree of the chief of the Sufis of Sindh, King of the poets. Honorable Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai Rahmatullah Alaih can be traced back to Hazrat Ali Karamullah Wajahu through the eight Imam Musa Raza in the 23rd generation. The shortest pedigree of Latif can be described as thus: Shah Abdul Latif, the Ascetic Bhittai son of Sayed Habibullah alias Sayed Habib son of Sayed Abdul Qudoos son of Sayed Abdul Karim who is known as the Shah Karim of Bulri. (Kandhro, 1962) Read online: Khazanat-ul-Arifain. URL: http://www.sindhiadabiboard.org/Catalogue/Sufism/Book8/Book_page2.html. (Accessed on June, 10 2019).

This sanctified projection of Latif corresponds with the image of Latif in the eyes of majority of Sindh Muslims and a section of Muslim activists working with local Sindhi media. They project Latif and his poetry as the reflection of Prophet's life and message. For instance, Shafi Muhammad Lakho explains the message of Latif's poetry as derived from Quran. He said in a telecasted program that Latif's whole message is summed up in his poem, 'Je to bait bhaniya, se ayatoon aheen', niyo mann laeen priyan sande paar de' i.e., that seem you lyrics are in fact Quranic verses, . . .they link you with Almighty Allah. See Quran and Shah Abdul Latif, Part 1 video 1. (January 2, 2011) published by Mehran TV/ Falahaakhirah. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTIRC5CeoaE.

Majority of regular visitors to the shrine of Latif also cherish similar views. During my teaching tenure in the spring of 2015 at University of Sufism and Modern Sciences, the newly established campus of the University of Sindh, near the shrine of Latif, the visitors told me several stories that attested to the fact that for them Latif was essentially a typical Pir who must be revered because of 'pak' (sacred) caste. Regular visitors to his shrine narrated the hagiographies and some make-believe facts that are also found books written by both the Progressive writers. For instance, to praise Latif's attachment to his ancestral Gaddi (custody of Shrine) Fakir Badal told that like most of Muslims, Latif would perform prayers five times a day along with his disciples, and that he inherited Gaddi (spiritual seat of Qadri-Awaisi Sufi order) from his father. This fact corroborates with Dr. Baloch's argument that Latif was initiated Murshid (Sufi Pir). He substantiated his argument by reproducing the letter of Shah Latif written to Makhdum Muhammad Moeen seeking guidance as regards how to discipline disciples in the ways of Tariqa (masters path) (see Baloch, 2010, pg 81-85). Following his Islamic Sufi order, Latif converted to a few Hindus to Islam and honored them with Turban, that symbolized discipleship. For instance, Dr. Baloch writes that Latif converted a Rabari who came to be known as Din Muhammad Fakir (Baloch, 2010, p.103). Like any other Pir, Latif
had also employed his disciples as servants (Baloch, 2010, p.86-87) Fakir Badal told that Latif built the mausoleum of his father and even went to Multan to purchase special bricks made of clayed material called *Kaatchi* to build the mosque at Bulri and repair the front façade of the shrine of Shah Abdul Karim, the ancestral custodian of Gaddi. ‘He installed a plank engraved with name ‘Latif’ at the front door of the shrine of Shah Karim Bulri, but Sayed Wasih, a Gadi Nashin of Shah Karim’s shrine got it removed’ he told. The visitors that I interacted believed in many hagiographic events realted to Latif that proved Latif’s inherited spiritual superiority and the inherited inferiority of others. For instance, a Fakir Achar narrated that once a Kanjri (Dalit woman belonging to dancing community) named Gulan visited Latif with the intention to seek blessings and began dancing and singing to appease Latif. Then she asked Latif to bless her with a husband. Latif prayed for her that she will be married to the ruler of Sindh and that she will have a son that will also rule Sindh. The prayer was instantly gratified as the sepoy of the Kalhora ruler reached instantly and took away Gulan Kanjri. When Kalhora ruler saw Gullan, he instantly fell in love with her and proposed to marry. Eventually she married and was also blessed with a baby boy. This approach to Latif’s life and poetry that celebrate genealogical, hagiographic and religious credentials is normatively common among both the Progressives and the conservative the Sunni/Barelvi and Shia Sufi sections of society. Contrary to them the Progressives, in an attempt to project the egalitarian aspects of Latif’s life, de-emphasize such real or fabricated narratives that allude to the heterodox but casteist and the sectarian consciousness of Latif and his present-day followers. This tendency of the Progressives was also noticed by Sorley, but he does not reflect on it with the critical gaze required to expose casteism. According to him, the saintliness, mulivocality and the sectarian predilections of Shah Latif were reconcileed in the late colonial Sindh on the anvil of modern ideologies. Sorley writes:

Modern delight in the poems is of a different genre entirely. It comes partly from the development of a literary taste that is quite modern […]. Though the ideas in the poems are still believed they are not believed in quite the same way or for quite the same reason (Sorley, 1940, p. 206)

H.T.Sorley (1940), Schimmel (1974) and Baloch (2010) do not make any pretentions to hide Latif’s corporeal misgivings either, the approach that can hardly be cherished by the Progressives who desperately attempt to conceal Latif’s shortfalls. For instance, Baloch (2010) hints that Latif was socialized in a religious culture dominated by Sayed sages and in spaces dotted with graves and tombs of saints (pg. 60), that he was taught Quran in his childhood, which as a lasting impact on his thought, and that Latif continued in an uninterrupted academic contact with his religious teachers during adolescence (p.51). Baloch also mentions Shah Habib (Latif’s father), who was deemed capable of transcendent miracles, and was well-versed in religious education, would writes amulets for blessing, taught Latif in his early decades of life (Baloch 2010, p.53). Baloch also mentions that the controversy had occurred at the demise of Shah Latif on the issues of succession (Gadinashini), and that probably Latif’s brother Jamal Shah succeeded to the spiritual Gaddi (Baloch, 2010, p.42). Unlike Sorley, who largely suspects most of hagiographic accounts of Latif, Dr Nabi Bux Baloch however, tries to be selective rejecting highly superstitious accounts, and makes believe in the factual-looking heresies, such as Latif having spiritual and divinely insights during mediations and narrating the ‘mystical glance’ Hashim Shah confirming that ‘Latif’s lamp will illuminate’(see Baloch, 2010, pg. 57-58). He does not extrapolate on the social impact on Latif of Sayedist, casteist and religious import of hagiographies prevalent during Latif’s lifetime on his mindset.

Baloch is relatively more objective in narrating the account of Latif than most of the Progressives, who rather adopt an idealized semi historical path suggested by Gurbaxani, Misra Qaleech Baig99See Lughati Latifi by Misra Qaleech Baig written in 1914, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1910) by the same author, and Leela Watannal (see Gurbaxani, 1923; Huzoorbux, 1981 & 2007), to come up with several refined compilations and overlapping anecdotal biographies to graft the 18th century ‘medievalist’ (Sorley, 1940) Latif in the 20th and 21st century postcolonial Sindh. For instance, to project the uniquely Sindhi sociological virtue of Latif, Dr. Ghafoor Memon writes:

While reading Latif’s poetry, one comes to realize that Shah Latif has been under the influence of several psychological conditions. Therefore, Shah Latif’s poetry cannot be dissociated from the other intellectual
debates in the world around by classifying him under any single intellectual domain. In fact, the poetry of Shah Latif resonates with both the silence and cry, illuminates with the lessons of meekness and humbleness, defense of patriotism and humanitarianism. While at one place Latif suggests to strive, at other place he seems to be fatalist (p.92) [...] At certain places he seems to patronize the mystic ideology of Wahadat-ul-Wujood (Unity of Being), and at others he brings in the life-world and the worldview of Jogis, fishermen, potters and he blacksmiths. He also seems to suggest action and romance. Yet, to understand Latif in his entirety, it is important to first understand the knowledge systems of the subcontinent and psychology of the common Sindhi folks (p.93). [...] There is no coercion in Latif but choice, yet he suggests that once the choice is made, it should then become the purpose of life of a person (pp. 98-99). To sum up, we can argue that essence of knowledge of systems of Sindh that evolved under the influence of historical processes exist in Latif. So much so that Shah Latif does not disappoint to those persons who may wish to abandon everyday mundane life to explore the spirituality and the metaphysics of the universe. If you want to be a Jogi, then abandon all desires, Be the slave of the slaves, So that your name could be written amongst the spiritualists. (Shah) Dr. Ghafoor Memon (2002, p.202)

Ghafoor’s pragmatic evaluation of Latif leads one to infer, and perhaps rightly so, that Latif offers several diverging, overlapping and often contradictory choices to the reader. Hence, Latif does not disappoint any being. He has in store for every person, section of society or narrative and ideology may it be Sayedism, casteism, Marxism or nationalism.

Memon however, preconditions most of what Sayed offers with the attachment with Sindhi suggesting that, ‘Latif patronizes the philosophy that germinated from this land of Sindhi’ (Memon, 2002, p.103). This pre-condition of knowing the modern, material and the spiritual philosophies in the peculiarly Sindhi context turns Latif into a mysteriously sanctified and uncanny poet-philosopher who could be easily accessed by the common folks. Resultantly, instead of critiquing Latif in his historical context, they rather mystify Latif and project as the saint-philosopher who cannot be easily understood. This belief in the highly sanctified status of Latif is cherished by non-Progressive sections of society as well. For instance, when in conversation with, Ashiq Latif, a Bralevi Sufi, I questioned the scientific and the political credentials of Shah Latif, he replied:

To understand the science of Shah Latif, first understand geography, history, anthropology, language, philosophy. Apart from that explore and wander from one place to another like Latif did. Only after that, you would probably be able to have some idea that Shah Latif is not only a poet but the expert in many fields. His poetry is not only an expression of aesthetics but also of the empirical reality.

This over-qualification of Latif as the social scientist, philosopher and thinker, the understanding of which is conditioned with the Savarnizing and the neo-Kshatriyas or the ex-Shudras to adopt Savarna caste names, and to identify with the Hindu (post) Vedic religion and the Savarna customs. And Ashrafizing demands to be highly well-versed are repeatedly made by the Progressives, Sindhi Sufi activists and the Sindhi nationalists, and have also been repeatedly asserted in the writings of the Sindhi ‘Progressives’. Such clerical (to put differently, Brahminic and sanskritised) preconditions, in a way, make Latif inaccessible to the average Sindhi reader, not to mention of the Dalit and ultra-subalterns. Latif poetry thus may become the readily available instrument of epistemic violence against the Dalitbahujans, and may even be used to justify rather brazenly the hegemonic caste-blind narratives as do the nationalists are often observed to do. They construe the ‘aesthetic’ egalitarian and emancipatory meanings out of the verses that could otherwise have the casteist import or any other discriminatory and self-contradictory rapport. Take for instance the interpretation of Latif by Dr. Sher Mehrani who has done the doctorate on the aesthetic value of Shah Latif’s poetry. He presents a bait (verse) with castiest import to prove that Shah Latif is the poet Philosopher.

Abro is the chief, Samo the grace of all,
Everyone pays homage to the ruler of Katch, and he tooobliges.

Source: Translated from Kaliyan Advani (2009) Shah SainJo Rasalo
This same bait is alternatively quoted by the men of Abros as the proof and attestation by Latif that they have descended from superior ruling Abro caste. Observing solemn indifferent to it casteist import, Mehrani (2014) suggests the reader to believe that, ‘Shah Latif is that phenomenon of Sindhi wisdom, before which, as if, all the routes of knowledge and intellect, all movements, ideologies and the narratives come to a pass’ (pg 25). Then he writes, ‘I am unable to understand how come Shah [Latif] griped over so many philosophies and narratives. I can’t conceive of any philosophy whose elements may not be found in Shah-jo-Risalo [Book of Latif]. Despite having such a great poet, I wonder why we Sindhi people are so lacking’ (Mehrani, 2014, p.34). Interestingly he explains that dilemma again by quoting another verse of Shah Latif that, I think, hardly explains the point made by Mehrani. This tradition of quoting Shah Latif, independent of whatever version of his text is referred to (for multiple textual versions of Shah-jo-Risalo see Akram 2015), and whether it truly explains the social, economic and the political phenomenon or not, is the popular pastime of Sindhi Progressive literary circle (see for instance Memon, 2017; Bhutto, 2017; Mangi, 2018).

Similar to Mehrani’s attempt, others from among the Progressives try to understand some classical debates in philosophy, postmodernism and post structuralism through Latif’s poetry (see for instance, Memon, 2016, pp., 74-88), existentia lism and dialectical materialism1111Dr. Ghafoor Memon sees the concept of dialectical materialism in this line of a verse of Latif; ‘Goliyan, Goliyan ma a lahan, Shaal ma Milan hota’ (May I keep wandering in search of the Hoot [ Truth/ ] ) (see Memon, 2002, p. 92). Hoota (Hota ) was the Baloch (upper caste) lover of Sasui (probably an ‘upper caste’ Hindu girl). Here, Ghafoor interprets it in the meaning as the metaphor for material reality. in the light of the poetic genius of Shah Latif (see Memon, 2002, p.92-103) . They tend to defend modernity as against the alienating postmodernity that they fear has overwhelmed Sindhi nation (Chandio, 2016)1212Jami Chandio (2018) KLF-2018-Literary Traditions of Sindh. Karachi Literature Festival. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2zqVQfHwU&t=1283s. (accessed June 8, 2019). In fact, the heterodox and multivocal nature of Latif’s poetry in many cases renders it empty of any concrete content thereby allowing both the progressives and the conservatives to infer the meaning of their choice. Resultantly, most of these highly philosophic renditions of Latif end up being materially shallow that do not help understand the caste-class relations, Dalit exclusion and Dalit emancipation. Take another example of the Progressive writer Jami Chanio who defines Latif as the ‘Thinker’. Chandio, while debating on Sufism, Latif and or Sindh often claims to have worked on Tassawuff from philosophic, historical and rational perspectives. In a program on Mysticism recorded for online dissemination he said that, ‘I used to think that Shah Latif is not a Sufi to the perfection. But when I studied Tassawuff with the utmost depth, then I had to change my opinion, and for we scientific people to refute our opinion is not considered as the flaw. […] Our commitment is with the facts’. 1313See online, School of Oppressed, URL: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcefHuY-etAnX5onUYytYzw. (accessed on June 6, 2019) Jami Chandio’s scholarship on the ‘Crisis of Federalism and Prospects for Provincial Autonomy in Pakistan’ is highly authoritative and scientific. Yet his understanding and the interpretation of Latif and Sufism is way far from science. His approach to Latif is essentially political, and then mystical and or esoteric in nature. The problem arises when he appeals to his social scientific credentials to qualify his arguments related to Latif, Sindhi nationalism, Sufism and or mysticism. Jami Chandio, by giving forth his own interpretation based on the specific verses of Latif, argues that the uniqueness of Latif lies in his fiikr-ji-wahdat, which is the ‘unity of intellect or thought’ (see Chandio, 2016). Hence, for Chandio, Latif is an extraordinary ‘mufakir’ (original thinker), a poet with the purpose (Chandio, 2016, p. 30). He explains:

[Latif’s] characters are different only in appearance, in their external environment, causal factors, and the life conditions. For instance, in Surr Kalyan, Latif’s characters speak of the unity of love and purpose, in Yaman Kaliyan of lover and her beauty, in Khanbhat symbolizes beauty, or the boatman’s woes in Surrirag. According to Chandio:

The unity of purpose emanates from the narrative of pearls in Samoondi, from the romantic rebel of Suhni, from Sasui’s1414As the folk legend goes, Sasui, who was biologically a Brahman girl, in fact, grew since childhood as a ‘lower caste’ fisherwoman, and identified herself as such. She did not know about her Brahmin past. prioritization of ‘search’ over ‘destiny’, from the great lord Sammo in Kamod, from the dare of Moriro
in Ghatu, from the lover of Sorath, or Rai Diyach who was compelled to behead himself for his love of music, from the brave warrior of Kedaro, or from the Jogis of Khabori and Ramkali, from the Kutiaar of Kapaiti, from the heron of the orient, or from the beggar (mendic) of Pirbhati. All these characters only differ in appearance, in their metaphorical presentation, but their concepts, attitudes, values, humanness, destiny, struggle, and honour is the same. That is why; I see the same unity of wisdom, imagination, sentiment, attitude, travel and the destiny in all the characters of Latif. Jami Chandio (2016, p. 28-27)

Chandio’s rhetorical and sketchy explanation of what he construed as the ‘unity’ of thought was unlike of, and rather contradictory to what H.T.Sorley (1940) had explicitly explained without mincing words seven decades earlier, that Latif’s genius essentially lied in the lyrical, mystical and the religious quality of his disorganized and disorderly verses that, although rich in philosophic meanings, do not convey a single philosophic narrative. Being deeply religio-mystical, the poetry of Latif ‘cannot be understood without a clear idea of what this mysticism is. According to Sorley (1940), Latif’s genius ‘is neither philosophic nor discursive’ (p.245). More than the unity of thought, it is the not easily explainable mystic notion of the ‘self-abandonment in the divine and the sinking of individuality in the One, which allies it with the doctrines of Buddhist and Vedantic ideas’ that lie at the core of Latif’s philosophy (p. 278). Sorley argues:

While he has complete command of the ideas that live in the greatest of the Persian poets, he feels in himself the power not so much to expatiate on these as to use the shorter love-song to convey the impression by suggesting the background of solemn reality which can give a deep meaning to the most trivial occurrences of daily life [p.245]. When the poetry is so good, it is a pity that it could not have been made better by a clearer conception of what poetry is and what it has the power to achieve through the orderly arrangement of thought and a greater breadth of interest. The Risalo is thus a complicated web composed of many strands. Without doubt the most important of these strands is Sufi philosophy [p. 251].

In an attempt to project Latif as the secular and progressive poet-thinker, Chandio ignores this essentially religio-mystical essence and the inherent lack of the philosophic coherence in Latif’s poetry identified by Sorley, who although sometimes a bit Eurocentric (see Sorley, 1940, p.250), and elitist (see Sorley, 1940, p.291) discrediting folk poetry of the ‘lower caste mendics’ such as ‘Manghanhars, Bhats and inferior wandering minstrels’ (Sorley, 1940, p.237), he is nonetheless more objective and factual in the assessment of Latif than the Chandio (2016), Hussain (1997), Paleejo (2012) or than that of most of the Progressives.

In fact, both the Sorley and the Progressives’s projection of Latif presents the idealized picture of mendics or beggars that emphasizes the esoteric aspects as the essence of Latif poetry1515According to Sorley 1940), the mysticism which runs all through the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif is a love mysticism with a rich religious significance. It is not a philosophic mysticism. (p.226 the understanding of which lies beyond the ‘common man’. But, as I have argued in this paper, this assertion does not hinder or discourage the common man to interpret Latif as per their vested interests and the ‘(un)lettered’ and ‘ignorant’ understanding.

Hence, while Chandio, in his idealistic vein, defines the thought of Latif in a secular tenor as based on the unity of intellect, which is then further qualified by him to the esoteric interpretation to the unity (waḥdat) of universe, nature, life, idea, deep sentiment and the perception (see Chandio, 2016) aimed at transmitting spiritual and the culturally transformative waves to unite and liberate the soul (i.e., individuals and the Sindhi society) (Chandio, 2016, p. 30), H.T. Sorley (1940) sees the essential nature of Latif’s poetry being religious mysticism, not love mysticism or a nature mysticism and premised on the ‘union with God, the meeting of those separated by the vain tricks of earthly delusion till they find ultimate satisfaction in the truth and beauty of the divine. (p.227-28)’. Sorley explains that ‘the true message of the Risalo, however, is religious. […] While Shelley and Browning see in love the key to understanding the world, Shah Abdul Latif finds it in union with God through the difficulties and vicissitudes of love. Love is a means to an end and not an end in itself (p. 231).

The Progressives, like Chandio, to project the secular but syncretic imagery, depart from Sorley’s interpretation of Latif that conforms the preponderance of religiousness in his poetry. In this manner, Chandio tries to draw the attention towards the anit-orthodox, or the rather the heterodox literary-poetic genius of
Interpreting Latif in a highly idealistic vein, Chandio argues that Latif attempts to inculcate critical thinking and the virtue of self-introspection among the Sindhi people. Hence, invoking the image of Latif who is beyond and above the layman’s approach, Jami sees the problem with the people of Sindh who do not pick the enlightening message of Latif (Chandio, 2016, p.30-35). He criticises traditional layman approach to Shah Latif, who merely revere Latif as ‘auliya’ and ‘buzrig’ (saintly figure). For Jami the people of Sindh in general are ‘pasmanda’. While analyzing Latif’s worth as a person for the ‘pasmanda’ or the marginalized Sindhis, he evades to bring the question of socioeconomic disparities between the non-pasmanda and the Ashrafia Sindhi elite within his analytic framework (Chandio, 2016, p.30-31).

In this manner Jami completely ignores the underside of Latif’s message, the multivocality and the heterodoxy that defies ‘unity of intellect’ or the coherence of ideas except only mystic fantasy based on folklores and the existing Sufi traditions. Most importantly, he completely undermines the sociological importance and the force of the casteist, patriarchal and class-based structures that may have constrained Latif himself and continue to shape the worldviews of the Sindhi people in contemporary Sindh.

Chandio’s is the typical way the ‘Progressives’ project the egalitarian aspects of Latif’s poetry. This projection deliberately evades to comment on Latif’s explicitly heterodox and self-contradictory verses that at best present the panoramic view of Sindhi society and culture bringing into consideration the hegemonic relations between the Ashrafia and the non-Ashrafia castes and the men and women. But like Chandio, most the Progressive literary critics do not write and speak on that self-contradictory heterodoxy. Begin heterodox, Shah Latif does not seem condemn these caste hierarchies, and the gender disparities. Instead his casteist heterodoxy reflects from the pick of the heroes from Sammat and Baloch castes. The Progressives tend to de-emphasize that aspect of Latif and in most cases, to construct the universally humanistic image of Latif, tend to avoid using or referring the verses suggestive of Islamic Shariah, the belief in the superiority of Sayeds, or the verses that suggest the slave morality and the normalization of patriarchy.

This post-Partition sublimation of Sayedism and Sammatism through the discursive manipulation of the poetry of Latif that was primarily initiated by the Sufi nationalist leader G.M. Sayed (1952), and followed by both the ‘Progressive’ nationalists and the Marxist literary critics, activists and the novelists, short story writers and the poets, does not consider the multivocal ambivalence and the internal contradictions within Latif’s poetry or the contradictory interpretations of the similar verses by the conservative Shias, Sunnis, Sufis, atheists employ Latif as per their religious and political interests.

Even the Progressives and many hardline secular nationalists cannot resist the lure of this inherent religiosity in Latif in his verses that proclaim ‘These verses of mine, that you think is poetry, are in fact, Quranic verses’; ‘Kafir thean ta eeh baab sharia jaa chadd, mann mushrikann gadd, taa jean wejho thean wisaal khe’ Bhittai’ (Be an infidel. If you want to shine in the world, Give up chapters of Shariah. Merge your heart with the polytheists, so you come closer to the reunion1616Translation from Hasan Mujtaba’s ‘Glipse of Beloved one hundred Poems of Shah Abdul Bhitai). Such kind of verses Latif Bhittai are taken by nationalists as having real import and prefer to quote Shah Latif and more than Quran or any other religious scripture. Similar kind of poems attesting the sacred value of Shah Latif’s ‘kalaam (poetic verses) have been written by Shaikh Ayaz and others. Abdul Rahim Garhori, a heterodox Sufi poet also wrote ‘Aahe Abdul Latif te razanando rahman, jore jahin Quran sindhi mein sahi kayo (God Almighty has blessed Abdul Latif such that he produced Quran in Sindhi).

Since the political Sufism of G.M.Sayed was developed to counter the political Islam of Pakistan, it wittingly or unwittingly, tended to introduce completely new forms and practices of religious reverence as well. The latest precedent of introducing Latif as nationalist-religious figure involving Nayab Sarkash Sindhi a nationalist lady comrade affiliated with JSQM, proves that Sindhi nationalists persist with their ideology to break the hegemony of Shariah based Islam by the introduction of alternative Sufi Shariah. Nayab Sarkash, allegedly solemnized the nikkaah (religious matrimonial contract) with the payer reciting Shah Latif’s poetry (instead of Quranic verses, according to the Shariah-i-Lateefi (the code of Laltif), the innovative Sufic-religious way of wedding couples. She began reciting verses relating to happy matrimonial life, and the culture of Sindh. She began it by saying that she will end the ritual by praying for the good life of wedding
couple and the emancipation of Sindh. She begins prayer:

“O lord of Sindh (Latif), In the name of great heroes, heroines, martyrs of Sindh, mother earth of Mohen jo Daro, mother Vidhata, Raja Dahir (Brahmin king of Sindh), Jeseena, Dodo Soomro, Baghun Bai, Nangar Soomro, Jam Nizamuddin, Doolah Darya Khan (all upper caste rulers), Makhdooom Bilawal, Haider Shah Sanai, Lateef Saain (all three Sayeds), Hoshu (Sheedi, lower caste), Hemoon (caste Hindu), Sain G.M.Sayed, Comrade (syed) Haider Bux Jatoi upper caste Marxist nationalist, Shaheed Bashir Khan Qureshi (upper caste), incuding martyrs and heroines, Sulani, Sasui (upper caste), Marvi (lower caste), Noori (Dalit) Jam Tamachi’s (upper caste fictional characters in Bhattai’s poetry) truthfulness, love and greatness, Sindh people’s Sindhis, faithfulness of the sons and daughters of soil, , I beg success for this new couple, groom Nazeer Ahmed Khosa (upper caste), and bride Sindheera (upper caste) in the name of all above heroes and heroines, their sorrows, pains and courage. For the sake of the emancipation of Sindh keep this couple faithful to the struggle for Sindh. O, lord of Sindh (Latif), be guardian of this couple. Long live ‘Sindhu Desh’ (political name of demanded separate nation for Sindhis).

The content of this wedding prayer brings to relief the whole Sindhi progressive nationalist’s orthodox-heterodoxy to introduce new form of anti-statist, separatist, anti-Shariah or anti-Islamic new religion, grounded in political Sufism, with Shah Latif, a Sufi poet chosen as the leading ideological figure, followed by upper castes mainly Rajput or Sammat ruling castes, and Sayeds as the most revered caste, most of them being war heroes.

Among several names mentioned by Nayab Sarkash, only two caste Hindus, one lower caste African slave, and a fictional lower caste heroine of Shah Latif’s poetic character qualified to be heroes/heroines of Sindh. Rooplo Kolhi, the only known Dalit war hero and Amar Ghaman Singh Bheel, the social reformer probably, and many other Dalit heroes failed to make to that sacred list. The religio-political-cum-matrimonial prayer ended with the slogans for Sindhu Desh, the separate homeland on which Sindhi separatists are struggling. Its casteist import, it elevation of Shah Latif as a saintly figure and reverence for the Sayeds, did not catch the attention of anyone.

Since the nationalists project their activist against the Islamists, the reaction to such rituals of inversions also comes from the religious right. The wedding prayer stirred huge reaction in civil society circles particularly among Sindhi Islamists of Deobandi sect affiliated with JUI (F). The religious clerics got infuriated over it, a petition in Larkana high court was filed against Comrade Sarkash, and she was compelled through social pressure to publicly confess her blunder and apologize. Although the religiosity shown by Mullahs (Shias/Sunnis) in that particular case can be condemned on several grounds, the re-introduction of Shrine culture and Sayedism in the name of political Sufism to counter political Islam of the state, can be equally condemned if viewed from Ambedkarian perspective as it was surreptitiously attesting supremacy of Sayeds, and the traditional ruling castes of Sindh.

To sum up the discussion in this section, it can be argued that the attestation of Latif in the name scientific and philosophic or the ideological investigation made by the Progressives, seems to support the thesis that due to Latif’s heterodox and multivocal nature of poetry, ambiguity regarding the originality of his verses (Sorley, 1940, p.170) 1717See online, ‘Review of H.T.Sorley’s Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit’ by Annemarie Schimmel, posted on Nov 27, 2015. URL: www.muniraami.ca., and the sketchiness of biography can easily be emptied of the bulk of its content to fill in any other epistemology, ontology or the narrative. Hence, the ‘Progressives’, like any other social and political group, tend to legitimize and popularize the selective verses that may have, at least on surface, the egalitarian, patriotic and the pro-poor import. In an attempt to construct the transformative or the revolutionary image of Latif, the Progressives exonerate Latif from any possible hegemonic impact of the casteist values and the Ashrafia privileges that he enjoyed in his times1818A few of the Progressives have been exceptionally critical of the anti-pir, anti-Sayed, anti-patriarchal, pro-peasant or anti-landlord and feminist liberating themes in their writing, such as Amar Jaleel, Noorul Huda Shah, Manik and Khair-un-Nisa Jafferi, but the anti-caste aspect critical of the dominant castes, particularly of Sayeds, is less prominent in their writings.. Unlike the Progressives, the non-Sindhi foreign scholars such as H.T. Sorley (1940), A. Schimmel (1974) and to some extent of Asani (1988), do not allow for such sectarian and
the ideological pretensions, and bring to relief Latif’s religious, sectarian, and to a certain extent Sayedist predilections. Unlike Progressives, H.T.Sorley does not tend to confuse the ideal message of Latif with the real or the empirical reception of it by the common Sindhis.

Conclusion

From the discussion it is abundantly clear that the Progressive elite’s recasting of was aimed at achieving the unity of Sindhi nation without necessarily confronting casteism, Sayedism and Dalit exclusion. The Progressives deliberately undermined the casteist and the fatalistic import of Latif’s poetry and biography, the fact that contradicts the empirical and historical imaginary that proves otherwise and instead corresponds with the narratives of different converging and diverging ethnic, sectarian and political groups.

Since Shah Latif’s poetry was gathered from multiple not easily verifiable sources, it allowed the ‘Progressives' to legitimize and popularize the selective verses that had, at least on surface, the egalitarian, patriotic and the pro-poor import. It is because of this caste-blind and the pro-Sayed selective over-reliance on Latif that the narratives of the Progressives lack the egalitarian, inclusionary potential to question the social practices and the social structures that sustain the caste-based inequalities and the hegemonic relations existing between the Ashrafia-Savarna and the non-Ashrafia-Savarna classes. Their assumption that Latif is and should be interpreted metaphorically proves wrong because in the casteist society the metaphors of caste used by Latif to refer to God cannot be simply interpreted as such. For Soomra, Sannmats, Baloch and Dalits, castes are literal referents to their own proud or the humble historical and contemporary background.

The discussion leads to conclude that the attestation of Latif by the Progressives in the name scientific and philosophic investigation seems to support the thesis that due to Latif’s heterodox and multivocal nature of poetry, ambiguity regarding the originality of sources and the sketchiness of his biography can easily be emptied of the bulk of its content to fill in any other epistemology, ontology or the narrative. Unlike what the Progressives want to make believe, Latif was both orthodox and heterodox in his life and poetic renditions as he in his poetry he did not suggest to deviate much from the caste-based sociopolitical order of his times and, personally, did not relinquish the capital that he inherited based on his genealogical legacy. Based on that, I predict that, very much like in the past, the multifarious possible interpretations of Latif’s poetry and his personality create the anti-political crises of interpretations and self-contradictory projections that depoliticizes the problem of casteism and cannot help mount the explicit critique of casteism, Sayedism, and Dalit exclusion, much less eradicate it, and rather allow for the casteist tendencies to thrive.

References

Baloch, Dr. N.A. (2010), The Life & Thought of ShahAbdul Latif Bhittai by Dr. N.A. Baloch. Government of Sindh, Karachi.


